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U.S. Financial Services Committee
Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity

Legislative Hearing on Affordable Housing Needs of America's Low Income
Veterans

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Testimony

Chairwoman Waters, Ranking Member Biggert, and Members of the Subcommittee thank you for inviting me to testify today on the “Affordable Housing Needs of America’s Low Income Veterans.” My name is Karen Dale, and I am the Executive Vice President of Operations and Strategic Development at Volunteers of America. In this capacity I am responsible for the organization’s long-term care division, program services, and affordable housing development and management. I have significant experience at all levels of care delivery and management with specific expertise in program development, operational effectiveness, and financial management.

Introduction to Volunteers of America

Volunteers of America is a national, nonprofit, faith-based organization dedicated to helping those in need rebuild their lives and reach their full potential. Through thousands of human service programs, including housing and health care, Volunteers of America helps more than 2 million people in over 400 communities. Since 1896, our ministry of service has supported and empowered America’s most vulnerable groups, including at-risk youth, the frail elderly, men and women returning from prison, homeless individuals and families, people with disabilities, and those recovering from addictions.

In times of disaster and in times of war Volunteers of America has been there assisting those in need. When the United States entered World War I, Volunteers of America focused its efforts on “Holding the Home Lines.” Care for children and housing for women expanded, and canteens and accommodations were opened for service men. Again, in World War II, Volunteers of America expanded and adapted services to support servicemen, as well as mothers engaged in defense work. We also opened new programs to combat rising juvenile delinquency. Volunteers of America’s concern for servicemen did not end with the conclusion of these wars, but continued in 1950 when we initiated a campaign against “wide spread public indifference and even hostility to men in uniform.”

As homelessness reached crisis proportion in the 1980s, homeless veterans began appearing in increasing numbers in our emergency shelters. When the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) initiated support for homeless veteran services in 1987, Volunteers of America quickly partnered, opening new housing and support services for homeless veterans. Today, Volunteers of America is at the forefront of the issue of homelessness for veterans-as a service provider and an advocate.

Homelessness and America’s Veterans

On any given night in the United States 800,000 persons experience homelessness. Nearly 195,000 of these men and women have served in the armed forces. Over the course of the year, approximately 500,000 veterans will experience homelessness. Veterans are over-represented in the homeless population.

At least 45 percent of homeless veterans suffer from mental illness, while over 50 percent have substance abuse problems. Furthermore, 33 percent were stationed in a war zone during their military service-service that lasted at least 3 years for two-thirds of homeless

veterans. According to the VA 11% of the newly homeless veterans are women- a percentage that is steadily increasing as more women are deployed in combat support roles. These female veterans report significant levels of sexual assault and trauma and a number of them have children, who may follow them into homelessness.

While most homeless veterans served during prior conflicts or peacetime, the VA reports an increase in the number of homeless following their tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, these veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq are experiencing high levels of mental health diseases such as Post Traumatic Stress disorders (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and mental illness. Though the VA does a tremendous job in providing homeless veterans with primary care and mental health services, along with transitional housing, current resources can not match the demand for assistance, or provide for permanent supportive housing for the growing number of veterans who will need long term housing assistance. A 2005 VA report found that roughly 20,000 permanent housing beds and 10,000 transitional housing beds are needed to assist homeless veterans.

Last year Volunteers of America in partnership with the Corporation for Supportive Housing and the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans convened a unique group of government officials, non profit providers of services to veterans, and public policy advocates to participate in a leadership dialogue about the federal policy landscape for homeless veterans. This leadership dialogued resulted in the release of our joint report entitled "Ending Homelessness Among Veterans Through Permanent Supportive Housing." The report brought awareness to a situation with which you are all too familiar -- the extent of homelessness among our nation's veterans.

Volunteers of America's Housing and Supportive Services for Veterans

Volunteers of America is a national leader in providing permanent and transitional housing for veterans along with job training, case management, education, legal assistance, mental health and substance abuse treatment for veterans. In 2006 we served over 6,000 homeless veterans, almost all of whom were honorably discharged, through housing and supportive services. Locating and connecting with homeless veterans is critical to the success of all of Volunteers of America's programs. Our activities focus on both preventing and ending homelessness among veterans. Many of the veterans we serve have not been receiving medical treatment from the VA-nor are they receiving their VA benefits to which they are entitled. Furthermore, veterans from more urban areas typically experience longer periods of homelessness, while those from rural areas have more often been living in substandard facilities. To this end, I want to highlight some of our urban and rural veterans programs that we have across the country and share some of the stories/experiences from the veterans that we serve:

California

In Los Angeles, CA we serve 102 homeless veterans each day. Responding to local needs, 20 veterans with addictions reside in a recovery home, 80 reside in a residential setting where job skills and employment are provided, and 2 veterans reside with their families in apartments. Because we were serving many frail elderly, we developed a special program for this group. Mr. Jackson is a 71 year old male who started smoking crack cocaine after his

wife died of cancer. He went into drug treatment at one of Volunteers of America's drug programs and then went to the Veteran Succeeding 65 Program (VS-65). VS-65 is a program that provides supportive services for frail homeless veteran ages 65 and over. This program assisted Mr. Jackson with obtaining all of his benefits due to him, a part-time job at the VA, an entire new set of teeth and an opportunity to save well over \$4000.00. Mr. Jackson saved enough money to leave the program and move into Volunteers of America's low income housing for elderly veterans. He is doing great and still checks in with the VS-65 program staff on a regular basis. This program is important because it is part of a facility that houses 80 people that live in the Grant & Per Diem Program, named Ballington Plaza. We received a Special Needs Grant & Per Diem grant from the VA to provide extra support services for the frail elderly. There are only a few of these programs in the country. What Mr. Jackson's story illustrates is that as a veteran he has been able to move to affordable permanent housing- only because we had developed it with other non-VA funds. We need this continuum throughout the country.

Florida

Venus G. came to a Volunteers of America of Florida's transitional housing program for veterans. There she received a treatment plan, consisting of NA meetings, individual counseling through the VA, and received training on coping with health issues such as bipolar disorder, PTSD, and diabetes. Venus began her education requirements for a childhood education degree, "I want to own a child care center one day." Her gratitude is evident in her smile and tone. "If it wasn't for the staff, I have no clue what my life would be like. In not even 2 years, my life has turned 180 degrees to the better...this program really works, I'm living and enjoying the moment right now."

Walt, a veteran of the US army, had been living on the streets and hopeless. He was unemployed, alcohol dependent, without financial support and suffering from PTSD. Walt says, "After living on the street I was quite wary of what was going to happen at the Volunteers of America of Florida program." There, under a safe roof, he was provided with referrals and linkages as staff encouraged him to take care of his medical and mental health treatment as he desperately needed. To this day, Walt remains alcohol free, has graduated the two year program and has his own apartment. Walt says, "The Volunteers of America of Florida program quite simply saved my life."

Outreach to Florida veterans is achieved through street outreach programs, including our VA funded Florida Veterans Mobile Service Center, a 40-foot state-of-the-art vehicle with a fully contained medical, dental and health service facility that outreaches to homeless veterans throughout the state. When the Center finds a homeless veteran, he or she is immediately provided with food, clothing, a primary care medical examination a determination of eligibility for VA and other government benefits, and an assessment of housing needs. In addition, our Florida local office has a program entitled "Cabins in the Woods." This program places approximately 30 veterans in individual households in a rural setting. The housing facility was designed with input from veterans who participated in focus groups throughout the State. Based on the need and preferences expressed by veterans, the efficiencies will feature private entrances, residential climate control, and a private screened porch. Veterans influenced not only the qualities of the housing community; they will be part

of the construction process. Through partnerships with local contractors, veterans will be an active part of the workforce to build the housing.

Ohio

Volunteers of America of Greater Ohio responds to the needs of veterans on the street in Dayton, Columbus and Cleveland, Ohio. Veterans are served through Volunteers of America's own unique service models, and through cooperative approaches with local VA Medical Centers and other service providers in these communities. The Greater Ohio affiliate coaxes veterans from the street through veteran to veteran engagement and encouragement. Once veterans enter the veteran service center each veteran is encouraged to develop his/her own service life plan. With the implementation of the "Cleveland Model" that is intensive case management and wrap around clinical services coupled with transitional housing, vocational skills training and job placement and subsequently permanent housing placement the veterans is afforded all the tools and services and support needed to assume a productive place in society.

Volunteers of America's Collaboration with Federal Government to Assist Homeless Veterans

Advocacy for our nation's veterans is a privilege and a responsibility. As a provider of housing and services to veterans, Volunteers of America builds excellence on partnerships to address homeless veterans. At a recent national testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Veterans Affairs, Subcommittee on Health, Volunteers of America of Florida stressed that successful service to homeless veterans is founded in strong partnerships, the ability to network statewide, a continuum of housing options and an array of support services. The testimony also addressed the diligence needed to combine federal and local resources to get the job done.

Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program and Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program

Volunteers of America serves homeless veterans as the largest grantee of the Department of Labor's (DOL) Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program (HVRP). The purpose of this program is to reintegrate homeless veterans into meaningful employment within the workforce. As a grantee, Volunteers of America provides programs for veterans that focus on employment and job training, career counseling, and resume preparation. The supportive services we provide these veterans include providing transportation vouchers, clothing, and permanent, transitional housing and referring the veterans to medical and substance abuse treatment centers. Another program that assists veterans that is administered by the DOL and that we are a grantee is the Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program (IVTP). The program provides direct services, through a case management approach, to link incarcerated veterans with appropriate employment and life skills as they transition from a correctional facility into the community. Volunteers of America's offices in Los Angeles, California, Tampa, Florida and Louisville, Kentucky manages these programs in Los Angeles, Chicago, and nine cities in the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Florida and Ohio.

Therefore, the \$33/day per diem note will always fall short of paying in total for what is needed. Identification and combining of resources is essential and should be encouraged strongly. In my opinion, the VA Grant and Per Diem service center payment does not relate to operating a center.

Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing Program

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development has only one program that is directly targeted to veterans-the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program. In 1992 HUD established this program to "provide for permanent housing and ongoing treatment from substance abuse disorders." This program uses a combination of HUD Section 8 vouchers and VA community based clinical case management. The program is intended to provide veterans with long-term assistance. Nevertheless, due to expected low turn over and funding limitations only 4600 veterans have been able participate in HUD-VASH programs. At that time the program received three rounds of commitment for a total of 1,780 vouchers worth \$44.5 million. Nevertheless, the program has not received any additional vouchers since 1992 and this year for the first time Congress included funding for additional HUD-VASH vouchers in the amount of \$75 million for the new vouchers which could provide assistance for up to 7500 veterans. According to the VA, the HUD-VASH program works extremely well. After both the 18 month and 2 year intervals, 95 percent of veterans remain stably housed. In addition, 40 % of veterans improved their employment status, 60 percent improved their financial status and 65 percent improved their independent living skills. HUD-VASH is a promising program that should be expanded to meet the additional needs of homeless veterans. In addition to the fact that only a remaining 2,500 vouchers are authorized up until 2011, with no additional vouchers allocated to the program since 1992, we recommend that 20,000 Section 8 Vouchers for the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) program be issued on an annual basis, making the program permanent. This would provide permanent housing subsidies and case management services to homeless veterans with mental and addictive disorders, by appropriating funds for additional housing vouchers targeted to homeless veterans.

Legislation to Assist Homeless Veterans—H.R. 3329 Homes for Heroes Act and H.R. 4161 Veterans Homeless Prevention Act

Volunteers of America strongly supports both H.R. 3329, the Homes for Heroes Act and H.R. 4161 Veterans Homeless Prevention Act. The Homes for Heroes Act contains several important provisions that would assist the government and non profit agencies such as Volunteers of America in our efforts to increase the supply of affordable housing for veterans. Specifically the bill would provide shelter for homeless veterans and homeless veteran families and prevent low income families from falling into homelessness. In addition, H.R. 3329 would establish a \$200 million assistance program for supportive housing and services for low income veterans as well as permanently authorizing 20,000 vouchers pursuant to the HUD-VASH program. In addition, the measure would establish a technical assistance program that would authorize \$1 million in HUD grants to assist organizations like Volunteers of America with our housing development efforts for veterans. Finally, the bill would require HUD to issue on an annual basis a report on its programs and activities that would assist the federal agencies, service providers and others in ascertaining how their programs are assisting veterans.

We are pleased to see the introduction of H.R. 4161, the Homeless Prevention Act. First, we support provisions in the bill that would authorize the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, in coordination with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, to carry out a pilot program to prevent at-risk veterans and veteran families from falling into homelessness by expanding the availability of housing for very low income veteran families. Second, we believe it is important to provide funding to assist affordable housing developers, such as Volunteers of America in our efforts to acquire real property and rehabilitate existing housing to assist low income veteran families. This provision is especially important as it is costly for us to acquire decent property, maintain our buildings and provide supportive services to meet the demands of homeless veterans. We strongly encourage Congress to pass both H.R. 3329 and H.R. 4161.

Topics for Consideration and Recommendations to the Subcommittee:
The Need for Permanent Housing and the Homeless Condition of Women Veterans

Permanent Housing

One of the top unmet needs for veterans is the availability of affordable permanent housing. There are certain aspects of the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that may contribute to higher rates of homelessness among veterans including high rates of PTSD and TBI which can cause unstable behavior and substance abuse problems. These conditions coupled with multiple tours off duty could make it more difficult for these veterans to successfully reintegrate into their communities and makes it more difficult for them to maintain a stable job. In fact a recent study released by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, who I am pleased is here with us today, indicates that one millions veterans who served after the September 11 attacks, over 70,000 are paying more than half of their incomes for rent which leaves them susceptible to becoming homeless. Like their non-veteran counterparts in society, veterans become homeless when their incomes are too low for them to afford housing, when there is an inadequate supply of affordable housing to address their needs, there is a lack of adequate job skills, and if mental and emotional issues are present that result in them being unable to hold down a steady job.

The recent mortgage crisis in this country is another factor that is adversely impacting veterans that could contribute to their homeless condition. After several years of an expanding housing market and soaring housing prices, many service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan as well as those who have already returned to the US are experiencing financial ruin in today's housing market. The subprime mortgage crisis, coupled with an increase in interest rates, and the requirement by lending institutions to insist on a sizeable down payments for first time home owners could make it more difficult for our service men and women, who have limited resources, to partake in the American dream and own their own home. To this end, we are pleased that both that you, Chairwoman Waters, and Chairman Frank are addressing this important issue. Furthermore, we wish to applaud Rep. Bob Filner (D-CA), the Chair of the Veterans Affairs Committee who held a field hearing on "The Subprime Mortgage Crisis and America's Veterans" last month in San Diego, California.

Homeless Women Veterans

Volunteers of America and other service providers are keenly aware of the unique challenges that women veterans face when they return home. There are an estimated 8,000 female veterans who are homeless in the United States and this number is expected to rise as more women return from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, in addition to the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and drug dependence that they may experience there are also elevated levels of sexual harassment and Military Sexual Trauma (MST). In fact a 2006 study, "MST rate of harassment from 55% to 70% and rates of sexual assault from 11% to 48% among women veterans.

Though, we would like to take this opportunity to compliment both HUD and the VA on their recently proposed request for \$12 million in new grants for programs for female, mentally disabled, and elderly veterans – double the current funding for these "special needs" programs, I believe the VA would agree that more needs to be done. For female veterans who find themselves on the streets, the problem of finding an adequate shelter is often compounded by fear of sexual abuse. There are few veterans' services programs in the United States that are gender specific and there is a clinical need to have separate buildings and at a minimum dedicated floors for women to address their homeless condition. This feature is an important aspect for their treatment and recovery. In addition, some of these women are also mothers so there needs to be specific emphasis on how to address the multifaceted issues of homeless veterans with children. We are keenly aware of the unique challenges that women veterans face and we would like to recommend that Congress examine their unique needs and circumstances.

Conclusion

In addition to addressing the housing needs for veterans and the conditions that may result in their becoming homeless, Volunteers of America is concerned about two other significant issues facing veterans and their families. First, the current ranks of veterans are aging, placing new demands on medical services and nursing care. Second, as referenced earlier in the testimony, soldiers are surviving horrific injuries in the current conflicts (TBI and PTSD disorders) and returning home, creating unprecedented demands for rehabilitation, supportive services and accessible housing. Volunteers of America is uniquely qualified to assist with these emerging issues. As a major provider of professional long term nursing care for seniors and others coping with illness or injury, we offer a continuum of services that include assisted living, memory care, nursing care, rehabilitative therapy and home health. We also support individuals with disabilities in their own homes and accessible apartments, including ones specifically for persons with TBI and individuals with spinal cord injuries. Volunteers of America is committed to finding new approaches to address these emerging issues. Our service to veterans is based on this expertise and our excellent partnerships with federal, state and local governments. We look forward to working with Congress to end homelessness for veterans and all other Americans.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.